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IN DEFENSE OF RATIONAL RISK ASSESSMENT

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Risk in *Webster's* is "the possibility of suffering harm or loss."¹ Risk accompanies both action and inaction. To strategists, it is accounted for and mitigated, but not always or even commonly avoided. To the national security strategist, risk—to paraphrase the current defense strategy—is the likelihood of failure or prohibitive cost in pursuit of key objectives. In this view, some goals are beyond reach. Others are within reach, but the cost of achieving them puts more important ambitions in some jeopardy.² Unfortunately, those familiar with contemporary strategic-level military decisionmaking know that rational consideration of even the prospect of failure is absent. In high-level policy discussions, success is assumed.

From the beginning, Iraq was an experiment in risk taking. To be sure, the war's advocates saw it as risk mitigation as well—remember 'smoking guns' and 'mushroom clouds,' for example. However, at its core, toppling Saddam was about balancing the *certainty* of violent dislocation that accompanies overthrow of an unfavorable but stable status quo against the *hope* for a more favorable, future post-war political order. It was extension of "the democratic peace" by force—whether or not the forcible export of representative governance was ever a formal *casus belli*. In this context, Iraq engendered enormous risk from the beginning. There was the ever-present 'likelihood of failure or prohibitive cost' that needed to be accounted for in deliberate planning.

For example, there were obvious dormant sectarian divisions. Given Saddam's violent separation of ruler from ruled, this indicated the distinct possibility of uncontrolled civil conflict in the aftermath of the government's collapse. There was the extant Iraqi overdependence on primary resource exports for government revenues. This, in the developing world (which Iraq rejoined from below in 2003), commonly signals persistent danger to political order. There was a certainty that at least two of Iraq's neighbors would actively resist through politics, influence, and at times, violence—American success. Still others would be very sympathetic to Iraq's minority Sunni; if not quite hostile to Shi'a or Kurdish triumph. Others still—likely most—would remain reticent on the issue of Iraq's democratic success or failure. Finally, there was the precedent of the Soviet Afghan War. In Afghanistan (circa 1979-89), external intervention was a magnet for Muslim anti-colonial resistance. Tribalism, nationalism, and Muslim extremism combined to militate against Soviet success. These same forces join today with internecine sectarianism to similarly check American progress in Iraq.

Rational risk assessment in advance of the Iraq intervention would have identified and accounted for all of these. Each, after all—individually or in combination, could be enough to seriously delay favorable outcomes, prevent success, or drive strategic costs to prohibitive levels. Evaluating each seriously, thoughtfully considering their implications, and accounting for them deliberately in strategy development is a sign of

wisdom, not fear. Instead, those engineering the Iraq War framed strategic risk incorrectly. They assumed ultimate success—a stable, representative, multifaith polity—would rapidly and naturally occur as a result of the necessary but decidedly intermediate step of overthrowing the existing regime. Thus, in their view, the likelihood for some near-term “harm or loss” was insignificant compared to the anticipated return on the nation’s strategic investment. Their risk calculations simply never went beyond D-Day.

It is now well-documented that Iraq policy was made in a strategic vacuum. It appears no vizier-like or mandarin-like class on the inside carefully weighed specific grand strategic options vis-à-vis the United States, Iraq, and the world in detail, calculating different choices and their inherent risks and benefits. There were prescient warnings. It is now clear few were heeded. In short, the risk problem, as it was likely presented to the President, was a strawman. It failed to account comprehensively for the real hazards engendered in deliberate regime destruction, stabilization, and reconstruction in a large, consequential state. Iraq proceeded from risk assessment that in its sophistication went little beyond “nothing ventured nothing gained.”

This is a caution for the future. Risk-informed strategy does not indicate risk aversion. Identifying risks and hazards and accounting for their mitigation does not prevent action. Rather, it underwrites success. The bold too often mistake thoughtful consideration of real hazard for weakness. Quite the contrary, deliberate consideration of risk-adjusted choices increases the prospect for bold action’s ultimate success. Risk-informed strategy provides decisionmakers with a realistic accounting of strategic conditions as they are, versus as some would prefer them to be. It proceeds from the conclusion that raw capacity and desire alone do not determine success. It recognizes that our perceptions of our motives and intentions are likely quite different from the perceptions of others. Finally, it demands that strategists account for both the prospect of failure and the progressive accumulation of excessive cost that—without mitigation—might jeopardize long-term success and the security of interests of equal or greater importance.

ENDNOTES

1. Riverside, *Webster’s II: New College Dictionary*, Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, p. 957.

2. Department of Defense, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States*, March 18, 2005, p. 11, available at www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2005/d20050318nds1.pdf.

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